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CHARLES G. ZUG, III

Sir Walter Scott and George Thomson, The Friend of Burns

In the middle of 1811, Sir Walter Scott wrote the musician George Thomson to describe his difficulties in composing songs and added, "I am really more jealous of these little things than of long poems."¹ This seems a remarkable assertion on Scott's part, for by this time he had gained extraordinary fame with such long poems as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808), and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). No less interesting is the identity of Scott's correspondent, for George Thomson was the so-called "Friend of Burns," the man who had solicited numerous songs from the Ayrshire bard during the years 1792 to 1796.² What is not widely known is that Thomson pursued a similar relationship with Scott, by sending a large number of traditional airs for which the poet was to produce appropriate verses. Although the partnership between Thomson and Scott did not prove very productive, it is significant in that it reveals another facet of Scott's creative powers. In particular, it demonstrates Scott's continuing use of traditional materials and methods, very much in the manner of Burns himself. No less important, Thomson's inducements to compose appear to have been the major impetus behind Scott's decision to insert songs—many of his finest ones—into the long narrative poems and later, the novels.

Apparently, it was the Scottish playwright Joanna Baillie who suggested to Thomson that he enlist Scott's services. In early 1805 she wrote Thomson that: "I have been very much delighted lately in reading Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. I hope you have some assistance from him, if he condescends to write songs. He has

¹ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (London: Constable & Co. Ltd, 1932), II, 506.

² See Thomson's biography by James Cuthbert Hadden, *George Thomson: The Friend of Burns* (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1898).

the true spirit of a poet in him and long may he flourish." ³ It was thus *The Lay*, not the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, which led to Scott's involvement with Thomson. Thomson must have known of the latter work, since it had gone through two editions by 1805, but in view of his stated dislike for unimproved folksong, he probably ignored the collection and assumed that Scott had few talents that could be of use to him. Baillie's suggestion prompted Thomson to action, however, and on March 30 he sent Scott a letter containing two Welsh airs, for which he hoped Scott would write some verses.⁴ Although he normally used traditional airs to stimulate his poetic contributors, Thomson was not interested in folk music per se. Rather, his purpose was to publish large collections of what he considered to be "national songs," a term which can only be understood by examining Thomson's background and the unusual methods he employed to gather and organize his materials.

The inspiration behind Thomson's interest in native song was one Signor Tenducci, a very popular Italian singer and music teacher in Edinburgh. As Thomson later informed Robert Chambers, "it was in consequence of hearing him and Signora Corri sing a number of our songs so charmingly that I conceived the idea of collecting all our best melodies and songs, and of obtaining accompaniments to them worthy of their merit."⁵ To achieve his goal, Thomson developed a very singular method, to say the least. To begin with, he selected "every Melody which seemed the most simple and beautiful, whether he found it in print, or in manuscript, or got it from a voice, or an instrument." Much of the music he collected was traditional, but this was of little concern to Thomson, for he immediately sent it off to be embellished by such renowned composers as Joseph Haydn and Ludwig von Beethoven. These eminent musicians were engaged to assist Thomson in his project by composing "*Symphonies and Accompaniments*" to each of the original airs. The symphonies were intended as "a rich collection of new and original compositions, as to form an invaluable appendage to the Melodies." The accompaniments, on the other hand, were "to support the voice, and to beautify the Melodies," supposedly "without any tendency to injure their simple character." Altogether, Thomson felt sure that the

³ Hadden, p. 153.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hadden, p. 20.

embellishments provided by the famed German composers would "give an additional interest to the Melodies, very far exceeding what they before possessed."⁶

While thus refurbishing the tunes he had collected, Thomson simultaneously went to work on the texts. As for the originals, Thomson wrote that:

Although a considerable portion of the *Airs* had long been united to unexceptionable Songs, yet a far greater number stood matched with Songs of such a silly, vulgar, or indelicate character, as could no longer be sung in decent society, or among persons of good taste: and it became necessary, in order to preserve and perpetuate those beautiful Melodies, to rid them of their coarse metrical associates, and to get them matched with others more congenial to their nature and worthy of their beauty.⁷

Thomson, in other words, felt it necessary to obtain texts that were worthy to stand with the music of Haydn and Beethoven. This, of course, was where Burns and Scott entered Thomson's plan, along with Joanna Baillie, Thomas Campbell, Thomas Moore, James Hogg, Lord Byron, J. G. Lockhart, Matthew Lewis, in fact, just about anyone who was willing to provide replacements for the "coarse metrical associates" of the original airs.

It is easy to ridicule Thomson for his bizarre and incongruous methods, but he was a dedicated worker, and eventually succeeded in assembling not one, but three, collections:

1. *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*,
1793-1841, 6 vols.
2. *A Select Collection of Original Welsh Airs*,
1809-1814, 3 vols.
3. *A Select Collection of Original Irish Airs*,
1814-1816, 2 vols.

In addition to these works, from 1822 to 1825 he also issued a six-volume composite collection, *The Select Melodies of Scotland, Interspersed with Those of Ireland and Wales, United to the Songs of Burns, Sir Walter Scott Bart. and other Distinguished Poets: with Symphonies & Accompaniments for the Piano Forte by Pleyel, Kozeluch, Haydn & Beethoven*. Despite the famous names associated with them, Thomson's works never proved successful. Generally, the

⁶ George Thomson, *The Select Melodies of Scotland* (London and Edinburgh: Preston, 1822-25), I, i.

⁷ *Ibid.*

texts were far superior to the music, because the German composers who worked over the tunes had little sympathy for Scottish music. Still, Haydn wrote to Thomson that "I boast of this Work, and by it I flatter myself my name will live in Scotland many years after my death."⁸ Beethoven, on the other hand, apparently felt that "the 'Scotch snap' was the chief feature in the music," and he introduced it "in such profusion, even when quite foreign to the air, that the result is at times nothing short of comical." All of this was of no concern to Thomson, however, who stated that "the originality and exquisite beauty of Beethoven's accompaniments surprise one more and more."⁹ Apparently, they proved no less surprising to lovers of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish song, who failed to show much interest in the collections. The real problem, of course, was Thomson's original concept of "national song" which lay behind all of his work. In fact, the songs were really *international*, for they were variously written by English, Scottish, and Irish poets; set to music by German composers; all from the original inspiration of an Italian singer and music teacher.

The bastard concept behind Thomson's collection does much to explain why the songs Scott contributed are not among his best works. In view of his knowledge of Scottish folksong, particularly as exhibited in the ballads in the *Minstrelsy*, it is hard to imagine why Scott ever consented to help Thomson, and it is no less remarkable that he never criticized Thomson's methods. The only explanation appears to be that Scott acquiesced because so many other persons of distinction had done so, among them Burns and many of Scott's close friends. Whatever the actual motive, Scott did expend considerable effort over a period of some sixteen years attempting to fulfill Thomson's requests. When Scott's enthusiasm would flag, Thomson even resorted to the practice of sending Scott presents so that he would feel obligated to compose. At various times between 1806 and 1821, he sent Scott: "two beautiful drawings, the one of the Abbey of Dunfermline, the other of Donne Castle" . . . "a suit of damask table linen, which . . . obtained to the manufacturer one of the highest premiums given by the Board of Trustees" . . . "a picture painted purposely for you"; and finally, another "suit of our

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hadden, p. 120.

Scottish damask.”¹⁰ Thomson’s method of stirring Scott’s muse may have been unorthodox but it proved reasonably effective, at least until he sent the second suit of damask in 1821. Damask or none, Scott had had enough, for at that time he replied, “I have hung my harp on the willows for ever and a day, and though I feel the most unfeigned reluctance to decline any request of yours, yet I should do you injustice by undertaking what I cannot do either well or easy.”¹¹ Scott also identified the songs written specifically for Thomson’s use, and generously declared they were “the sole and exclusive property of the said George Thomson for all time coming.”¹² Thomson did not limit himself to those songs, however, for in his composite collection of 1822–1825, he also published other works by Scott, among them those which had originally been given to rival musicians such as John Clarke Whitfeld and Alexander Campbell.

One of the most interesting aspects of Scott’s exchanges with Thomson is the manner in which Scott developed a method for writing songs. Prior to Thomson’s initial request, Scott had worked extensively with Scottish folksong in preparing traditional ballads and writing ballad imitations for the first three editions of the *Minstrelsy*. However, it is essential to realize that Scott’s editorial work consisted entirely in writing—or rewriting—narrative poetry, not songs. True, Scott possessed the music for many of the ballads, and often sang them himself, but in preparing them for the press he focused entirely on their texts. The work on the *Minstrelsy* thus served as a prelude to the longer narrative poems that began with *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* in 1805. With Thomson’s prodding, however, Scott began to use traditional *tunes*, rather than simply the texts, as a basis for his own creations.

During his youth Scott did receive some musical training, but either due to the ineptness of his teacher or his own lack of ability, he never learned to play an instrument or even to record simple tunes. Scott was always ready to declare his musical shortcomings. For example, he wrote Whitfeld that “I have a wretched ear myself,” while to George Thomson he asserted that “ears *au fait de*

¹⁰ Hadden, pp. 155, 158, 167, 168.

¹¹ *Letters*, vii, 30.

¹² Hadden, pp. 169–70.

musique I have none."¹³ Scott was generally overmodest when describing his abilities, so perhaps the most impartial judgment of his musical talents is that of his friend R. P. Gillies:

For intricate compositions, which can scarcely be admired without scientific study, he probably had no taste, yet he delighted in music; and there were many Scotch airs for which he had an enthusiastic predilection; and which, without any pretensions to musical voice, he could strike up in convivial parties with perfect correctness.¹⁴

Whatever he may have lacked in the way of a voice or technical knowledge, he made up for with his enthusiasm and firsthand acquaintance with Scottish folk tunes and folksongs. This was the direct result of his early years with his grandparents at Sandy-Knowe and the many collecting expeditions made from 1792 to 1803. Such was his knowledge that in early 1809 he was able to inform Whitfeld, "I believe no man in Britain had more songs of all kinds by heart than I could have mustered."¹⁵

Since he was unable to read or produce his own music, Scott had to actually hear the tunes for which he was to compose verses. For example, in 1811 Scott sent two songs to Thomson and added, "the difficulty with me in song writing is not to find verses but to get something that is rather new. I will call one morning to hear the melodies."¹⁶ In like manner, he wrote to Whitfeld that "if you were near me to suggest tunes and hum them over till my stupid ear had got some hold of them I would write as many songs as you could desire, in fact in that way they compose themselves."¹⁷ In later years Scott also employed his daughter Sophia, an accomplished musician, in a similar manner. The Galloway antiquary Joseph Train, during one of many visits to the Scott household, recalled hearing Sophia play "some National Airs upon the Harp" and ask her father to write a few verses to "the Gaelic Air usually sung by Women at the 'Wauking of the Cloth'—in the Highlands. —Sir Walter acknowledged that it was good groundwork for a Song and said that he would at some not far distant period comply with

¹³ *Letters*, II, 147, 492.

¹⁴ *Recollections of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (London: James Fraser, 1837), p. 45.

¹⁵ *Letters*, II, 147.

¹⁶ *Letters*, III, 47.

¹⁷ *Letters*, IV, 179.

her request.”¹⁸ All of these examples are revealing, for they suggest how closely Scott’s general method corresponded to that of Burns. In essence, Scott used the music provided by others as a kind of charge for his creative battery. All he had to do was to hear the tune a few times so that his powerful memory could take hold of it. Once this was done, the songs would “compose themselves.”

Actually, Scott required still further assistance from musicians such as Thomson in order to ensure that his verses matched the given tune. An excellent example of the mutual cooperation between the two men is seen in a letter from Thomson to Scott, in which the former enclosed “two Melodies for which I wish you to write Verses; together with Examples, in order you may see at a glance in what *measure* it is necessary for you to form your Verses.” First, of course, Scott had someone sing or play the melodies for him, until he had them firmly planted in his memory. Next, Scott examined the “Example” supplied by Thomson, which was a sample verse appropriate for the music. In the letter cited above, Thomson sent Scott a tune called “The highland Watch” and added:

This charming Air strikes me as indicative of a sort of Lament or of manly sorrow. It requires 8 lines of Verse, and 4 of Chorus, in the measure & rhythm of the following example

O wat ye wha that lo’es me,
And has my heart a keeping?
O sweet is she that lo’es me
As dews o’ Summer weeping.¹⁹

Actually, Thomson enclosed a full eight-line stanza and a four-line chorus, but the remaining eight lines need not be cited as they are identical in form to the first four. Altogether, then, Thomson would provide Scott with the tune, a brief assessment of the emotional qualities of the music, and a complete sample verse and chorus. Apparently, in this particular instance, Scott was unable to compose a satisfactory song, for the author of the verses to “The highland Watch” which appear in Thomson’s *Select Melodies* is none other than Scott’s good friend James Hogg.²⁰ Possibly, Scott may even

¹⁸ Brief Sketch of a Correspondence with Sir Walter Scott Commencing in the Year 1814, The National Library of Scotland, MS. 3277, ff. 64, 70.

¹⁹ Letter of 27 August 1816, The National Library of Scotland, MS. 870, ff. 40–42.

²⁰ Thomson, v, No. 15.

have passed on Thomson's instructions directly to Hogg, for Hogg's verses correspond exactly to the "Example" above.

A more successful effort was the song Scott composed to the tune "Young Terence MacDonough," which he sent to Thomson with the following note:

I send you the *prima cura* of the Irish song, reserving corrections till I know how you like it and how it suits the music. I am apt to write eleven instead of twelve syllables in this measure, which does well enough for metrical rhythm, but not for musical. The foot can easily be supplied where omitted.²¹

The metrical problems to which Scott was referring are apparent in the opening lines:

Once again, but how chang'd, since my wand'rings
began—
I have heard the deep voice of the Lagan and Bann,
And the pines of Clanbrassil resound to the roar
That wearies the echoes of fair Tullamore.²²

The verse is written in perfect anapestic tetrameter, except for the first foot of the fourth line which is iambic. This is one of the eleven-syllable lines to which Scott referred, and it appears that Thomson, despite his penchant for accuracy and his willingness to tamper with his contributor's texts, did not feel it was necessary to add the twelfth syllable. A comparison of Scott's text with the accompanying tune provided by Thomson reveals that Scott had a good "feel" for the music. In the first place, each phrase in the tune contains twelve beats, meaning that Scott was entirely correct in his choice of a twelve-syllable line. More important, the tune is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, so that each measure receives three beats, and the third gets the greatest emphasis. This corresponds exactly to the anapestic foot, which contains three syllables, two shorts and one long—or, discarding classical scansion, two weak stresses and one strong one. There is no evidence that Scott received an "Example" for this tune; in fact, from his accompanying remarks above, it appears that in this case he may have composed the verses directly from the tune. Most likely, after he had listened to the tune and determined the number of beats (syllables) in each phrase (line), he then hummed it a few more times, listening for the rhythmic pattern of each meas-

²¹ *Letters*, III, 24.

²² Thomson, III, No. 42.

ure (foot). Once these quantities were determined, he could then construct an appropriate verse for the tune.

In conjunction with the somewhat mechanical problem of providing a correspondent length and foot to his verse, Scott always attempted to gauge the quality or feeling of the tune provided, so that the poetic sentiment of his verse would be appropriate to the music. Although Thomson usually helped him in this respect, Scott was by no means always successful. For example, in describing his efforts to compose a song to the tune "The Bed in the Barn," Scott informed Thomson that:

It is impossible for me to attempt this tune again, not having any idea of what words would suit it, and being moreover, incompetent to anything requiring liveliness or jollity. I have not a particle of poetical humour in my composition. A military or romantic song I may get at, but there I stop. I will therefore far rather try the Highland air, and as I shall be in town on Monday, when I can have the advantage of hearing you sing it. I will be in less danger of repeating my errors.²³

Apparently, Thomson agreed completely, for shortly thereafter, he sent the tune to Alexander Boswell, who proved more successful in composing a song for it.²⁴ Scott's admission is interesting, not only because it shows that he had to have a feeling for the tune, but also because it reveals that his range of composition was definitely limited. As suggested here, the stirring, martial quality of Highland music greatly appealed to him, and a large proportion of his songs was composed to Highland Airs.

With his predilection for military and romantic song, Scott largely confined his subjects to themes of war and romantic love. A typical example of the former is "The Bold Dragoon," which Scott sent to Thomson with the following account of its creation:

The preceding page contains a few tawdry stanzas to one of the airs you recommended, which I indited yesterday at Bankhouse on my journey here. . . . An old newspaper which I found in the inn suggested the application of the tune to the late splendid exploit of our horse near Campo Mayor, for which the burthen is very well adapted.

Although this was not one of Scott's finer creations—he even advised Thomson that "I have studiously kept thin of poetry in hopes of giv-

²³ *Letters*, II, 491–92.

²⁴ Hadden, p. 159.

ing it a martial and popular cast"—it does serve to illustrate his general method of composition.²⁵ Working under the influence of a strong emotion, dictated largely by the tune he had in mind, he happened upon a favorite subject and was able, in a very short time, to create the words to fit the music. In all respects, then, Scott worked to ensure that the form and quality of his verse matched that of the given tune. Under Thomson's tutelage, it is not surprising that his method began to resemble that of his eminent predecessor, Robert Burns.

Burns, of course, was the acknowledged master in the composition of Scottish song, and was the major contributor to James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* as well as George Thomson's various collections. Essentially, he created songs by using, in the words of one of his editors, the "peculiar method of writing always to airs." Actually, this technique is hardly "peculiar," for as Burns, himself, wrote in his *Commonplace Book*, "to sough [hum] the tune over and over is the readiest way to catch the inspiration and raise the Bard into that glorious enthusiasm so strongly characteristic of our old Scotch poetry." Years later, in a letter to George Thomson, Burns enlarged upon his method, explaining that "*Laddie lie near me*, must lie by me for some time. I do not know the air; and until I am complete master of a tune, in my own singing (such as it is), I never can compose for it."²⁶ Burns' statements leave no question about how he went about composing his songs. First, he memorized the tune; next he hummed it over and over, listening for its special qualities and shades of feeling. Only then, when he was the "complete master" of the music, did he feel ready to commence writing the verse. Burns was always more independent than Scott in this respect, for he could play the violin and read music, and so did not have to learn the tune from another person.

As for writing the verse, Burns detailed his method to Thomson in 1793:

My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment correspondent to my idea of the musical expression; then choose my theme; begin one stanza; when that is composed, . . . I walk out, . . . look out for subjects in nature around

²⁵ *Letters*, II, 483.

²⁶ James C. Dick, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (Hatboro: Folklore Associates, 1962), pp. vi, vii, 383.

me that are in unison and harmony with the cogitations of my fancy, and the workings of my bosom, humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed. When I feel my music beginning to jade, I retire to the solitary fireside of my study, and then commit my effusion to paper; swinging at intervals on the hindlegs of my elbow-chair.²⁷

Burns' summary is more detailed than any left by Scott, and there is no evidence that the latter would "look out for subjects in nature" as Burns so frequently did. By temperament, Scott preferred to sing in praise of romantic love or the cavalry in the Napoleonic Wars, rather than to a mouse or a daisy, a cotter or a peasant lass. Still, following Thomson's directions, Scott gradually learned to compose in much the same manner, for both poets moved inevitably from the given tune to an appropriate emotional state and finally, to the creation of the verse itself.

Ultimately, the relationship between Scott and Thomson never proved a very productive one, and none of the resulting songs can be included among Scott's finest. Although he was still trying to induce Scott to compose as late as 1821, Thomson apparently realized that he was not getting Scott's best efforts. As early as 1814 he wrote one of his correspondents that "song-writing is not Walter Scott's forte; for once that he succeeds he far more frequently fails."²⁸ Thomson probably never realized it, but most of the blame for Scott's "failure" was directly attributable to his own narrow tastes and requirements. Thomson's dislike for—or at the very least, indifference to—the traditional sources for the songs he assembled was clearly a major factor in Scott's lackluster performance. For example, the first two songs that Scott produced for Thomson, "The Norman Horse-Shoe" and "The Dying Bard," were founded on folklore with which Scott was familiar. With the latter, Scott wrote that the song was "founded upon a tradition that a Welch Bard when on his death-bed called for his harp & playd the tune to which the following verses are adapted requesting that it might be performed at his funeral."²⁹ This brief preface reveals that Scott began writing songs using the same technique that he had earlier employed on his ballad imitations in the *Minstrelsy*, that is, he based them on genuine

²⁷ Dick, p. 383.

²⁸ Hadden, p. 152.

²⁹ Two Songs in Imitation of Welsh Poetry, The National Library of Scotland, MS. 643, f. 2.

appears to be more the work of William Gilbert than Scott, and it is not hard to understand why the latter desired that it should remain anonymous. Aside from "The Return to Ulster," the only song written for Thomson in which Scott expressed any interest was "On the Massacre of Glencoe," which begins:

"Oh tell me, Harper, wherefore flow
Thy wayward notes of wail and woe,
Far down the desert of Glencoe,
Where none may list their melody?
Say, harp'st thou to the mists that fly,
Or to the dun deer glancing by,
Or to the eagle, that from high
Screams chorus to thy minstrelsy?"³⁵

The song is written in a rigid iambic tetrameter coupled with a rather repetitious rhyme pattern, and recounts the slaughter which took place in the Highlands in 1692. With its narrative qualities and regular octosyllabic structure, it has more the appearance of an excerpt from one of the long narrative poems than a song. In short, like most of Scott's contributions for Thomson's collection, it lacks the free-flowing form and the compressed, allusive manner necessary to generate a strong emotional response. In terms of the songs he received, Thomson was probably right in stating that song-writing was not Scott's forte. However, the problem was not one of ability, for under different circumstances, Scott proved that he was a song-writer of the highest order.

Ironically, Thomson's greatest contribution to Scott's work was an indirect one. In soliciting songs as he did, he gradually made Scott realize the artistic benefits of inserting songs into his larger fictional works. A brief survey of the major long narrative poems reveals Scott's growing use of song during the very period that he was working hardest for Thomson. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* was, of course, written before Thomson contacted Scott and contains only three ballad imitations and a translation of the *Dies Irae*. All four are simply narrative exercises in ballad imitation, a carryover from the *Minstrelsy*, and all occur in the superfluous Canto VI, suggesting that they are merely ornamental padding to fill out the

³⁵ *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, ed. Andrew Lang (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1898), p. 7. For Scott's opinion, see *Letters*, II, 506.

poem. *Marmion*, which appeared three years later, also reveals a debt to the *Minstrelsy*, in that it contains an excerpt from Robert Surtee's fake ballad "The Death of Featherstonehaugh," as well as Scott's "Lochinvar" which was based on copies of "Katharine Janfarie." Both of these are written in very unusual stanzaic forms, indicating that Scott was seeking to escape the restrictive form of the ballad quatrain.

The major innovation, however, is the lyric song of the squire Fitz-Eustace which begins:

Where shall the lover rest,
 Whom the fates sever
 From his true maiden's breast,
 Parted for ever?
 Where, through groves deep and high,
 Sounds the far billow,
 Where early violets die,
 Under the willow.
Eleu loro &c. Soft shall be his pillow,

(Canto Third, Stanza X)

Here for the first time Scott was using a song written to a traditional tune, for he informed his close friend Richard Heber: "As for your query about *Eleu loro &c* it is the chorus of a Gaelic song to which Constances words are in some measure adapted. I send this by favour of the typographical worthy Ballantyne—if you ask him he will sing you the song.³⁶ This song was written only a year or two after Scott's initial contribution to Thomson, and the importance of the music is evident in that even Scott's publisher could sing the song. To further enhance his lyric, Scott introduced it with the following passage:

A mellow voice Fitz-Eustace had,
 The air he chose was wild and sad;
 Such have I heard in Scottish land,
 Rise from the busy harvest band,
 When falls before the mountaineer,
 On lowland plains, the ripened ear.
 Now one shrill voice the notes prolong,
 Now a wild chorus swells the song.

(Canto Third, Stanza IX)

Scott's description is not fiction but the actual context in which he heard the tune, for he wrote Mrs. Clephane of Mull, a collector of

³⁶ *Letters*, XII, 300.

Gaelic music, that "it is really a Highland air, and sung by the reapers."³⁷ In short, to emphasize that this was a *song* and not a poem, Scott gave not only the text but the context and tenor of the music as well.

Apparently pleased with the success of his song, Scott decided to use a large number in his next narrative poem, and in 1809 advised Mrs. Clephane that *The Lady of the Lake* would "contain a good many lyrical pieces."³⁸ To prepare himself, Scott made a summer journey through the region described in the poem, where he "heard so many stories of raids, feuds, and creaghs, that they have almost unchained the devil of rhyme in my poor noddle."³⁹ Scott listened attentively to the music, for he later sent Whitfeld a description of the original air of the coronach composed for the poem, adding, "I wish you had been with me in a late tour through the Isles, where I heard many wild Hebridean airs sung by our boatmen to their oars, *which appeared to deserve both embellishment & preservation.*"⁴⁰ Scott apparently felt this way about the Highland airs he had heard, for *The Lady of the Lake* contains no less than twelve songs, and of these only one is a ballad imitation. Many of the songs are based on traditional Highland forms, such as the jorram (rowing song) and the coronach (lament), which concludes with these elegiac lines on the death of Duncan:

Fleet foot on the correi,
Sage council in cumber,
Red hand in the foray,
How sound is thy slumber!
Like the dew on the mountain,
Like the foam on the river,
Like the bubble on the fountain,
Thou art gone, and for ever!

(Canto Third, Stanza XVI)

Once again, there is no question that Scott was using traditional music as the inspiration, for in 1810 he informed Whitfeld that "I had some idea at the time of publication of sending you the book with one or two Gaelic airs which floated through my head at

³⁷ *Letters*, II, 162. See also the letter to Mrs. Hughes, II, 67-68.

³⁸ *Letters*, II, 261.

³⁹ *Letters*, II, 246-47.

⁴⁰ *Letters*, II, 375. My italics.

writing the songs."⁴¹ In addition, Scott provided extensive notes on the character and context of these songs, as well as their music and the clan bards who could sing them.

Shortly after the publication of *The Lady of the Lake*, Scott wrote Robert Southey that "having an eye to the benefits derivable from the change of stanza, I omitted no opportunity which could be given or taken, of converting my dog-trot into a hop-step-and-jump."⁴² Scott was referring directly to the numerous songs in the poem, and the manner in which they lightened and varied his normal octosyllabic "dog-trot." As suggested, Scott had earlier attempted to diversify his narratives by inserting ballad imitations. But the ballad quatrain has numerous similarities to the octosyllabic form and can only be varied so much and still remain a "ballad." Thus it was under Thomson's prodding and instruction that Scott discovered a new and more flexible poetic alternative. A second important function of the songs in *The Lady of the Lake* is that they give immediate insight into the tradition-bound way of life of the Highlanders. Scott's major purpose was to depict the inevitable struggle between the Highland and Lowland cultures and the ultimate defeat of the former. While the songs possess considerable intrinsic beauty, they also play an important role in unfolding the closely-knit traditional culture which so strongly influences the actions of characters such as Roderick, the Highland chief. Thus, by 1810 Scott had discovered important structural and thematic uses for those "little things" over which he was gradually becoming so jealous.

Scott's employment of song in *The Lady of the Lake* set a pattern for most of his subsequent work. *Rokeby*, published in 1813, contains a total of ten, among them some of his finest: "Brignall Banks," "A weary lot is thine, fair maid," "The Cypress Wreath," and "The Harp." In this poem Scott chose to focus primarily on characterization, and songs such as these serve to delineate the desperate condition of the young robber Edmund or the hopeless passion of Wilfrid. Scott then turned to prose, and it is unnecessary to cite the numerous songs and traditional singers to be found throughout the *Waverley Novels*. Without the examples, the suggestions, and even the persistent nagging of the "Friend of Burns," one wonders whether Scott

⁴¹ *Letters*, II, 375.

⁴² *Letters*, II, 340.

would have attained such mastery in the art of songwriting. Thomson clearly misunderstood Scott's special interests and temperament, and it is not surprising that the contributions he received were generally of poor quality. Despite their differences in taste and aims, Thomson did succeed in teaching Scott a new use of the folk materials—particularly the music—on which Scott always depended. In essence, Scott replaced Burns in Thomson's scheme of things, and so was taught the method of composition of his much admired predecessor. The relationships with Thomson, however, illustrate a crucial difference between the two poets. Burns normally wrote directly from his own experience, whereas Scott was invariably most successful in composing songs for use within fictional situations. Perhaps Scott's lack of musical self-sufficiency was an important factor here. Unlike Burns, Scott could not readily produce his own folk tunes, and so had to rely on others, like Thomson or Whitfeld, whose interests were very different from his. Scott was never an introspective person or one to openly reveal his feelings. Thus, he needed the long poems—and later, the novels—as a narrative context within which, with the additional inspiration of traditional music, he could compose his songs.

John Buchan, one of Scott's most sympathetic biographers, once observed that each of Scott's songs "is exactly appropriate to its mood; and it carries its own music with it—there is no need to set it formally to a tune."⁴³ Frequently, of course, there actually *was* a tune to accompany the song, though most often it did not appear with the finished text when it was published. Even when Scott apparently composed a song without the direct aid of a traditional air, there was "music" involved, as, for example, in Edmund's song "Brignall Banks," which Scott described to Whitfeld as follows:

The tone of his poetry is supposed to hover between a feeling of remorse and regret, and a desire to pass off jollily under his present condition. I should be glad I could so express myself as to enable you to comprehend my meaning, but being quite unmusical I can only say the tune should have a mixture of wild lightness & melancholy, capable in short by the taste of the singer, dwelling on particular notes, to be made either gay or sad as the words require."⁴⁴

⁴³ *Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1932), pp. 116–17.

⁴⁴ *Letters*, III, 195.

As Buchan points out, the quality of the emotion expressed and the music to which it is set are so perfectly joined that Scott's songs immediately assume an independent existence. Once Scott felt the appropriate fictional need for a song—whether the development of a mood or a story, a character or a culture—the song would rapidly take shape, most often from the music or words of one of the hundreds of folksongs that Scott retained in his powerful memory. And, although born out of narrative necessity, Scott's songs invariably surpassed the text in which they were embedded, and stand alone as the finest and most finished expressions of his poetical genius.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ For much of the research behind this paper, particularly two trips to Scotland in the summers of 1969 and 1971, I am indebted to the University Research Council at the University of North Carolina.
